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TAGS: PGOV PREL SR

SUBJECT: SERBIAN PRIME MINISTER KOSTUNICA AND
PRESIDENT TADIC - CO-DEPENDENCY

CLASSIFIED BY DCM JENNIFER L BRUSH FOR REASONS 1.4
(B/D)

Summary and Comment

¶1. (C) Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and President Boris Tadic dislike each other. This has the fortunate benefit of keeping the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and Democratic Party (DS) coalition together. Both men's political bases are equally based on exploiting differences between the two men and their parties, as they are based on their unified opposition to an independent Kosovo. During the months leading up to and through the end of the Troika Talks USG interests are reinforced by the Kostunica-Tadic rift. As long as the two can only agree on one thing - Kosovo -- their coalition will endure, and the government is likely to survive the aftermath of a possible Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). As long as holding the government together becomes the most important goal for both following a UDI, it is in neither's interest to provoke or encourage violence. The biggest danger lies in the government's losing control of Kostunica's anti-U.S./NATO rhetoric and having a random act of violence spin events beyond either's ability to manage. End Summary and Comment.

Focus on Interpersonal Relations

¶12. (C) Much has been made in the press and in observations by Troika officials of the palpable dislike between Prime Minister Kostunica and President Tadic. Particularly in the hyper-stimulated Serbian press this dislike is spun for domestic consumption and to reinforce both parties' political bases. The political spin typically consists of Tadic being softer on America and NATO than Kostunica. This spin plays out until the subject of Kosovo and Troika talks, when both men find a common voice. Up and down the political spectrum, interlocutors have been telling embassy officials there is no light between the two on Kosovo.

¶13. (C) Some among us might wish that Tadic would accept an inevitable UDI and to publicly support the move, pre-December 10. Tadic will not do this, as that would be the one act that could destroy the coalition, which would be political suicide for Tadic.

¶14. (C) The more likely scenario is for the two to take their differences -- and single unifying element (opposition to an independent Kosovo) to the end of the Troika negotiation. Neither wants to, or can be, associated with losing Kosovo. It is more important to both that the other be blamed than any particular outcome be achieved.

Focus on Staying in Government

¶15. (C) Both men's primary interest is to stay in government, for which they equally depend on each other. Neither Tadic's DS nor Kostunica's DSS believe it is strong enough alone to take on the radicals. They can only hold off the radicals, however, if DSS's perceived nationalism continues to be the primary difference between DSS and DS. In 2007 in Serbia, a pure EU-oriented, Trans-Atlantic-directed platform will not win. The population remains isolated and

bruised from the Milosevic years and the NATO bombings, though they equally fail to see the connection between the two. Many man-on-the-street Serbs still profess wonder that "our friends and allies America" would bomb them in modern times. A truly western-leaning political party, such as DS, cannot win on a pro-western platform in this environment, though its intelligentsia brain trust says all the right things.

¶16. (C) Likewise Kostunica still seems himself, and is perceived by most of Serbia, as the man who overthrew Milosevic; making an alliance with the Radical Party distasteful and unlikely. But his small spectrum of not-as-crazy-as-Radicals-nationalists, equally is insufficient to create a majority. This dynamic makes a DS/DSS Coalition essential to keeping the two parties in power.

Post-UDI

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¶17. (C) During discussions with the diplomatic corps and with Belgrade's think tanks, the view is increasingly emerging that the coalition will survive a UDI. This impression is based mainly on the population's war fatigue, and latent - though rarely expressed - view that Kosovo's Independence already is inevitable. There is little appetite for either sending Serbian boys to defend Kosovo or for sustaining any backlash from the United States/NATO. The scars from the 1999 bombing are still gaping in Serbia and elsewhere, perhaps intentionally left that way to remind the people of the awful consequences of supporting Milosevic.

¶18. (C) Though Kostunica is likely to continue to spout anti-U.S. and NATO rhetoric to reinforce his nationalist credentials, Tadic is equally unlikely to challenge him. Rather the result of this dynamic may be to frame themselves as defenders of Serbia's territorial integrity, while also laying the ground for a non-violent transition. For example, the government already has clearly ruled out a role for the Serbian National Army in "defending Kosovo."

The Risks

¶19. (C) The Kostunica/Tadic dynamic bears considerable risk. As populations in Northern Mitrovica and Southern Serbia begin to brace themselves for a UDI, the potential for random violence increases. Whether or not the coalition is ready to control this violence remains a question. Elements of the DS have approached the USG to inquire about possible early warning measures with UNMIK in order to reduce this risk. For example, Chief of Defense Ponos has asked DOD officials to help organize a meeting with UNMIK Commander BG Earhardt in Belgrade. While in Washington in early October, at a roundtable with the National Defense University, Assistant Defense Minister Spasojevic recommended the United States request a strong statement from NATO that KFOR will protect the Serbs, and a strong statement to Albanians to avoid any violence. In a later meeting with DASD Fata, Spasojevic asked the latter to visit Belgrade prior to December and to keep BG Earhardt in place through the next few months.

Comment

¶10. (C) The irony for long-time observers of Serbian politics is how atomized Serbian politicians can be while hiding behind their slogan of "Only Unity Saves the Serbs." Serbs seem to do best when uniting against a common enemy rather than uniting together for a common good, e.g., EU or NATO membership. Serbs have been able to unite against world-class enemies -- the Turks, Nazis and Stalinist Russia. During his time, Milosevic was able to create unity against the ludicrous triple threat specter of a Vatican/Islamic Jihad/Fourth Reich alliance. Now Serbs are united against a clearly awkward threat -- those who would "steal" Kosovo. The artificiality of the threat, in the short-term, will help Kostunica and Tadic unite to save Kosovo, while, we hope, they equally prepare for a Kosovo-free Serbia. End Comment.

MUNTER